

Noam Chomsky: "What is Terrorism?"

That brings us back to the question, what is terrorism? I have been assuming we understand it. Well, what is it? Well, there happen to be some easy answers to this. There is an official definition. You can find it in the US code or in US army manuals. A brief statement of it taken from a US army manual is, fair enough, is that terror is the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence to attain political or religious ideological goals through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear. That's terrorism. That's a fair enough definition. I think it is reasonable to accept that. The problem is it can't be accepted because if you accept that, all the wrong consequences follow. Now there is a major effort right now at the UN to try to develop a comprehensive treaty on terrorism. When Kofi Annan got the Nobel prize the other day, you will notice he was reported as saying that we should stop wasting time on this and really get down to it.

But there's a problem. If you use the official definition of terrorism in the comprehensive treaty, you are going to get completely the wrong results. So that can't be done. In fact, it is even worse than that. If you take a look at the definition of Low-Intensity Warfare which is official US policy you find that it is a very close paraphrase of what I just read. In fact, Low-Intensity Conflict is just another name for terrorism. That's why all countries, as far as I know, call whatever horrendous acts they are carrying out, counter-terrorism. We happen to call it Counter-Insurgency or Low-Intensity Conflict. So that's a serious problem. You can't use the actual definitions. You've got to carefully find a definition that doesn't have all the wrong consequences.

There are some other problems. Some of them came up in December 1987, at the peak of the first war on terrorism, that's when the furor over the plague was peaking. The United Nations General Assembly passed a very strong resolution against terrorism, condemning the plague in the strongest terms, calling on every state to fight against it in every possible way. It passed unanimously. One country, Honduras, abstained. Two votes against; the usual two, United States and Israel. Why should the United States and Israel vote against a major resolution condemning terrorism in the strongest terms, in fact pretty much the terms that the Reagan administration was using? Well, there is a reason. There was one paragraph in that long resolution which said that nothing in this resolution infringes on the rights of people struggling against racist and colonialist regimes or foreign military occupation to continue with their resistance with the assistance of others, other states, states outside in their just cause. Well, the United States and Israel can't accept that. The main reason that they couldn't at the time was because of South Africa. South Africa was officially called an ally. There was a terrorist force in South Africa. It was called the African National Congress. They were a terrorist force officially. South Africa in contrast was an ally and we certainly couldn't support actions by a terrorist group struggling against a racist regime. That would be impossible.

And of course there is another one. Namely the Israeli occupied territories, now going into its 35th year. Supported primarily by the United States in blocking a diplomatic settlement for 30 years now, still is. And you can't have that. There was another one at the time. Israel was occupying Southern Lebanon and was being combated by what the US calls a terrorist force, Hizbullah, which in fact succeeded in driving Israel out of Lebanon. And you can't have ... allow anyone to struggle against a military occupation when it is one that we support so therefore the US and Israel had to vote against the major UN resolution on terrorism. And I mentioned before that a US vote against is essentially a veto. Which is only half the story. It also vetoes it from history. So none of this was every reported and none of it appeared in the annals of terrorism. If you look at the scholarly work on terrorism and so on, nothing that I have just mentioned appears. The reason is that it's got the wrong people holding the guns. You have to carefully hone the definitions and the scholarship and so on so that you come out with the right conclusions; otherwise it is not respectable scholarship and honorable journalism. These are some of the problems that are hampering the effort to develop a comprehensive treaty against terrorism. Maybe we should have an academic conference or something to try to see if we can figure out a way of defining terrorism so that it comes out with just the right answers, not the wrong answers. That won't be easy.